Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

Responses to Information Requests

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10 February 2015

AFG105047.E

Afghanistan: Night letters [Shab Nameha, Shabnamah, Shabnameh], including appearance (2010-2015)
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Background

Sources describe night letters as

- a means of communicating general information or specific instructions to the local populace or targeted individuals, which are hand-delivered by night, and contain instructions, threats, or warnings for local Afghan individuals or small community groups (Independent analyst 9 Jan. 2015), and
- "threatening letters" to communities or individuals that are usually hand-delivered or posted to a door or mosque by insurgent groups at night and that are "a common means of intimidation and control of local communities by insurgents" (Human Rights Watch July 2010, 25).

Night letters were used by Mujahedeen insurgents (MRG July 2011, 139; Professor 19 Jan. 2015). Historically, in Afghanistan, insurgents used them during the period of the pro-Soviet regime to deliver threats (AIHRC 17 Jan. 2015; MRG July 2011, 139). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a professor, who is the Director of the Program for Culture and Conflict at the Naval Postgraduate School in California, [1] and who, for three decades, has been conducting and publishing research on Afghanistan and South Asia, including studies on Taliban narratives and "propaganda" such as night letters, noted that the re-emergence of the use of night letters, by the Taliban and other insurgents, after "the Taliban's ouster in 2001" (Professor 19 Jan. 2015).

2. Purpose and Prevalence

According to the Professor, night letters are a "primary method of Taliban communication" to rural populations in Afghanistan, as well as in urban areas, to express the group's "desires and demands" (Professor 19 Jan. 2015). The Professor also indicated that night letters "often threaten violence or death if demands are not met" and may also "advise" the audience (which can include an entire district, village, or community leaders) about forthcoming attacks or about expectations of conduct and behaviour (ibid.). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, an independent analyst on Afghanistan [2] explained that the intention of a night letter is usually to "spread fear" and that the purpose of the messages is "generally to threaten or to encourage compliance with Taliban instructions, often to ensure the local populace do not engage in any way with the Afghan government or international community" (Independent analyst 9 Jan. 2015).

According to the Professor, night letters are "extremely prevalent" in Afghanistan (19 Jan. 2015). According to information provided by the UNHCR to the Danish Immigration Service during a 2012 fact-finding mission to Kabul, night letters are a "common tactic used by the Taliban" and their use is "very widespread" in

the intimidation of those employed by the Afghan government or "Westerners" (Denmark May 2012, 31-32). Similarly, according to information provided by the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) [a national quasi-governmental body with a mandate to promote and protect the human rights of Afghans and to investigate alleged human rights violations (Canada 9 Feb. 2015)] to the same source, night letters are a "well known tactic used by the Taliban to intimidate people" (Denmark May 2012, 30). The US Department of State's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2013* indicates that the Taliban "continued to distribute threatening messages in attempts to curtail government and development activities" (US 27 Feb. 2014, 18).

An "independent policy research organization" in Kabul stated to the Danish Immigration Service that the prevalence of Taliban night letters varies in different regions, and that they are "widely used" in Kandahar (Denmark May 2012, 32). The International Organization for Migration (IOM) told the Danish Immigration Service that night letters are more prevalent in the countryside than in Kabul (ibid.). Similarly, according to information provided by the AIHRC to the Danish Immigration Service, the night-letter tactic is used less in Kabul, but is "widespread" in rural areas such as in Wardak and Ghazni provinces (ibid., 30).

3. Originators

Sources report that the Taliban are the main group that employs the use of night letters (Independent analyst 9 Jan. 2015; Professor 19 Jan. 2015). Sources report that other insurgent groups also use night letters, groups such as those associated with the Haqqani network (Independent analyst 9 Jan. 2015; Professor 19 Jan. 2015) or the Tora Bora Group, who operate as independent groups, but support Taliban activities (ibid.). A 2008 International Crisis Group report on Taliban propaganda indicates that these rival insurgent groups also employ night letters to claim territory (24 July 2008, 13).

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, an official of the AIHRC stated that, in addition to the Taliban and "illegal armed groups," criminal gangs involved in drug crime use night letters to demand ransom; night letters are also used by individuals seeking revenge or personal gain (17 Jan. 2015). The independent analyst stated that local militias and criminals use night letters "for their own agenda - which could certainly include masquerading as an insurgent group" (9 Jan. 2015). Similarly, sources report that those engaged in criminal activity use night letters in the name of the Taliban in order to "exploit" fear in their targets (Professor 19 Jan. 2015; International Crisis Group 24 July 2008, 12).

4. Targets and Recipients

The Professor explained that the primary "target audience" for Taliban night letters is the "local population," specifically the population in Pashtun-dominated provinces of southern and eastern Afghanistan, regions that have traditionally been the support base of the Taliban (19 Jan. 2015). According to the independent analyst, the targets of night letters are generally "specific individuals believed by the Taliban to be transgressing Taliban rules or instructions, or more generally to local community groups, such as a small village" (Independent analyst 9 Jan. 2015). He explained that targets include people that could be perceived as "low-level" targets, such as "officials, women, teachers, junior employees working with international organizations," among others (ibid.). Sources report that targets of night letters also include the following

- Afghan government employees (International Crisis Group 24 July 2008, 12; AIHRC 17 Jan. 2015; Professor 19 Jan. 2015), including police, security personnel and people perceived by the Taliban to be "spies" (ibid.);
- people working for international forces (RFE/RL 21 Nov. 2012; International Crisis Group 24 July 2008, 12; AIHRC 17 Jan. 2015) and embassies (ibid.);
- religious and intellectual scholars (ibid.), such as Ulema Islamic scholars that do not adopt Taliban religious interpretations (Professor 19 Jan. 2015);
- human rights activists, defenders (AIHRC 17 Jan. 2015), and educators and students (Professor 19 Jan. 2015; International Crisis Group 24 July 2008, 12; Pajhwok Afghan News 8 Mar. 2013);
- individuals working for national and international de-mining organizations (AIHRC 17 Jan. 2015) or non-government organizations (Professor 19 Jan. 2015);
- tribal elders (AIHRC 17 Jan. 2015; Professor 19 Jan. 2015);
- political parties (ibid.);
- religious "personalities" (ibid.);
- "businessmen (for ransom)" (AIHRC 17 Jan. 2015)
- women who work outside the home, including those working as teachers, or for the government, or in civil society (RFE/RL 7 Dec. 2012; Human Rights Watch July 2010 25-27); and

- in the March 2014 presidential and provincial elections, Taliban night letters were aimed at voters (IWPR 2 Apr. 2014; Killid Weekly 29 Mar. 2014; WSJ 11 Mar. 2014), *WSJ* 11 Mar. 2014), election workers, and those involved in election campaigning (ibid.; *Killid Weekly* 29 Mar. 2014).

5. Appearance and Types of Letters

According to the independent analyst, night letters are "generally short (one page) letters or notes" that are hand-delivered, and it could be argued that each one is basically of a "specific and distinct type" (Independent analyst 9 Jan. 2015). Letters are "very often handwritten and for particular individuals or communities with particular instructions" (ibid.). Also according to the independent analyst,

a generic night letter would have a Taliban title and heading, a few lines of very direct and simple instruction (including, if to a particular person, a description of what the individual has been doing wrong) and an official stamp, signature or closing identification. Taliban communiques at the local level are often rushed, crude and simplistic. Administrative resources, literacy, drafting skills - and even knowledge of what the official title of the [Taliban] organization might be - are not priority assets for the Taliban. (ibid.)

According to the AIHRC official, night letters sometimes use the Taliban's official letterhead, but mostly they are written on a piece of paper that is stamped, or has the sender's name and signature; they are typically handwritten and "in rare cases" they are printed (17 Jan. 2015). The Professor similarly explained that night letters have a variety of appearances from "very professional" printing, including Taliban symbols such as the logo, and signed by an "authoritative" Taliban official, to night letters that are handwritten and "very rough" (Professor 19 Jan. 2015). He further noted that major differences in night letters are those that are "officially endorsed by Taliban officials or religious figures" and those that are "more adhoc" products of an individual Talib or Taliban commander (ibid.). In a 2012 report on insurgent intimidation strategies in Afghanistan, the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) [3] stated that Taliban night letters can include "[t]he heading with the logo and title 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan' and the signature of the local Taliban commander" but also noted that these features are not always present on letters and that "different layouts can appear in different regions and from different insurgent groups" (EU Dec. 2012, 24). Several examples of night letters are attached to this Response.

Sources explain that letters are often written in the Pashto or Dari languages (AIHRC 17 Jan. 2015; Professor 19 Jan. 2015), in a specific local dialect of Pashto/Dari, depending on the target region or locale (ibid.).

6. Delivery of Night Letters

According to the independent analyst, "most" night letters are still delivered by hand and distributed at night, at which time they might be nailed to a door, wall, tree, or pushed under a door, or left on the street; he noted that "only a few" would be given out at any one time (Independent analyst 9 Jan. 2015). The independent analyst said further that "it would be assumed by the insurgents that much of the actual information dissemination would be carried out by the local population themselves" (ibid.). Similarly, the Professor explained that night letters are often posted on the door of the targeted individual, or on mosque doors, or the doors of the literate people in the village who would then read the message to the community at large (Professor 19 Jan. 2015).

According to the Professor, the delivery of messages by insurgent groups extends beyond "simplistic traditional Afghan systems" such as night letters; he explained that these groups are increasingly using digital technologies such as the internet and telecommunications to communicate their messages (ibid.). Other sources similarly report that, in addition to making use of cell phones, insurgent groups now use media technology including the internet and social media to make threats (Denmark May 2012, 32; Wired 17 Mar. 2011). Some sources note that threats are made by text message (International Crisis Group 24 July 2008, 13; Denmark May 2012, 31), particularly in Kabul or large cities (ibid.).

7. Reporting to Police and Actions Taken by Police

According to the independent analyst, whether a person reports a night letter to police depends on "individual circumstances"; however, "there is frequently little confidence in police ability (or even interest) in investigating and dealing with the threat" (Independent analyst 9 Jan. 2015). He gave the assessment that police have limited resources and capacity and would "only be able" to provide a "limited response" to a threat issued in a night letter (ibid.). Similarly, the Danish Immigration Service reported that, according to Cooperation for Peace And Unity (CPAU), an "Afghan-led non-profit organisation" that works to promote peace and social justice in Afghanistan (CPAU n.d.), even in Kabul, "people do not usually go to the police" when they receive a night letter or other threatening message, as police "would normally not take any action in these cases" (Denmark May 2012, 31). The AIHRC official explained that the police commonly register "very serious"

types of threats and will advise the victim to keep a low profile and report additional threats; however, "in practice, these actions are not ... effective" and, in most cases, individuals assess the seriousness of the threat themselves and take precautionary measures on their own, such as relocating (17 Jan. 2015). Similarly, according to a co-director of the Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN), an independent, non-profit research organisation that provides research and analysis for policymakers, journalists, academics and development workers working on Afghanistan (AAN n.d.),

[g]enerally, people receiving threats may go to the authorities if there is somebody they know [there]. Whether and how authorities react to the threat depends on a variety of factors, such as personal relations and the position of the person who is threatened, but often people are left to look after themselves. (ibid. 22 Jan. 2015)

The AIHRC official also explained that the reporting of a night letter may depend on where the person is living, and that in larger cities where the security situation is better, people report it; however, if they are living in an area where the security situation is "vulnerable" or the government lacks control over it, they do not report it to police (17 Jan. 2015). According to the independent analyst, some local police may have "links to insurgent groups," meaning that, for the recipient, reporting a Taliban threat "might even make the situation worse" (9 Jan. 2015). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

8. Consequences of Receiving Night Letters

According to the independent analyst, the "use, style, and intention" of night letters vary depending on the context (Independent analyst 9 Jan. 2015). He elaborated that

different Taliban local groups will decide and act in different ways, perhaps only loosely following Taliban guidelines and driven largely by the local circumstances in which they operate. Their actions will be different if they are able to operate relatively freely within a broadly pro-Taliban area instead of having to be more covert and aggressive in their activities if the area was perceived as anti-Taliban. (ibid.)

Similarly, according to comments obtained from a Kabul-based independent policy research group by the Danish Immigration Service, there is regional variation in the use of night letters, with the research group explaining that some targets "would normally expect" to receive multiple warning letters before any action against them is taken, whereas there are cases in which physical assaults and murders are carried out without advance-warning letters, or targets may be invited to defend themselves at a Taliban court (May 2012, 32).

According to Minority Rights Group International (MRG), night letters are "followed up with real violence, and in some cases murder," forcing recipients, such as women working in politics or the public sphere, to leave their employment or face risks to their family's safety (July 2011, 139). Similarly, the Professor explained that threats in night letters are "taken seriously" by their Afghan targets, and the consequences for ignoring letters include death (19 Jan. 2015). The Danish Immigration Service reported that, according to information gathered from several sources in Kabul in 2012, the consequences of ignoring threat letters include killings or "physical elimination," kidnappings or "abduction for ransom," hijackings, assault or physical beatings, and torture, among others (Denmark May 2012, 31). The AIHRC told the Danish Immigration Service that there were "different levels of intimidation" and in some cases killings may occur, while in others "the assault is limited to beatings or nothing happens" (ibid.).

The UNHCR told the Danish Immigration Service's fact-finding mission that Taliban intimidation and continued threats can lead to "physical elimination" in cases where warnings are ignored; threats "will mostly be repeated until the victim is silenced by obeying orders" (ibid.). Similarly, according to the independent analyst, "punishments are threatened [in night letters] and often acted upon. The arrival of such letters ... can cause much fear and stress within a local community" (Independent analyst 9 Jan. 2015). The same source indicated that, while the consequences of ignoring a night letter depend on "specific circumstances ... very often the stated threats are carried out" and people can be killed; otherwise, the source notes, "the insurgents would quickly lose their credibility" (ibid.). Family members of individual targets are also often intimidated (Denmark May 2012, 31; RFE/RL 21 Nov. 2012) and given death threats (ibid.).

Sources report that insurgents continue to target and attack aid workers (Freedom House 2014; US 27 Feb. 2014, 18), and government employees (ibid.). Freedom House reports that there was a "threefold increase in deadly attacks" against NGO staff in 2013, resulting in the death of at least 36 people, as well as a "dramatically" increased rate of kidnappings and abductions (2014). According to a July 2014 report of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), there were 428 civilian casualties from targeted killings (247 dead and 158 injured), 95 percent of which were attributed to "anti-government elements," and included killings of tribal elders, civilian government and justice officials, and mullahs (UN July 2014, 21). For detailed information on the situation of Afghan citizens employed by NGOs, international organizations, and schools, see Response to Information Request AFG103924.

9. Forged Letters

According to sources, forged threat letters can be obtained (Independent analyst 9 Jan. 2015; *The Times* 16 Feb. 2013) or "made-to-order" for a fee (ibid.). In the information it provided to the Danish Immigration Service, CPAU indicated that "it is quite easy to fabricate a Taliban night letter" and that, for different reasons, people will occasionally "pretend" to be the Taliban in order to employ threats by night letter or text (Denmark May 2012, 31). According to an article in the *Times*, there were reported cases of Taliban "shadow district governors" being paid to produce night letters for approximately 260 pounds [C$486]; "less official letters supplied by enterprising counterfeiters" can cost up to approximately three times more (*The Times* 16 Feb. 2013). The *Times* reports that, in response to such letters, the Taliban leadership commenced an investigation and warned that the authors of such letters would be punished under Sharia law for copyright infringement, with harsher penalties for Taliban insurgents caught forging letters (ibid.).

9.1 "Authentication" of Night Letters

The EASO concluded an analysis on Afghan night letters by stating that "[i]t is not possible to list indispensable features of genuine Taliban night letters or to define what they should look like" and that "[i]t is very difficult to distinguish between genuine Taliban letters and forgeries" (EU Dec. 2012, 24). Similarly, the independent analyst stated that documents purporting to be from Afghanistan, including night letters, are "difficult to authenticate" even with "a detailed understanding of the particular case history" of the document (9 Jan. 2015). According to the Professor, "authentication" of night letters is difficult (Professor 19 Jan. 2015). He has observed variations in night letters with Taliban logos, others that are professionally printed or handwritten; he noted, however, that they are "often signed by a local religious leader," which is a "good indicator of authenticity" (ibid.).

According to the independent analyst, some of the typical problems with the authentication of Afghan documents, generally, including night letters, are

poor quality of documents, lack of computers and associated IT/hardware, ease of fraud/faking, hand-written documents hard to read, differing working practises, poor (or no) storage of data or records, out of date (or non-existent) stamps or certification, random kinds of stationery, uneducated or semi-literate writers, limited co-ordination between groups/departments. (9 Jan. 2015)

According to the official of the AIHRC, the sources of "authentication" of a night letter are the intelligence units of the police and the army, and the National Directorate of Security (NDS), which would have to check whether the signatory of the letter is an operating member of the Taliban in the area (17 Jan. 2015).The Professor expressed the opinion that a test of authenticity would involve consulting village elders for their opinions, as they would have knowledge of the target and the issues involved (19 Jan. 2015). The AIHRC official indicated that challenges to "authentication" of a night letter include a lack of security in the area, verifying the existence of the signatory of the night letter, and a target's lack of cooperation because of "personal reasons" or a "fear of reprisal from the Taliban" (17 Jan. 2015).

According to CPAU, in information obtained by the Danish Immigration Service, people receiving a threatening message on their phones will have the number traced through the cell phone company to identify the sender (Denmark May 2012, 31).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

Notes

[1] The Professor's publications on Afghanistan and South Asia have appeared in a wide variety of peer-reviewed journals and media sources and he continues to conduct regular field research in Central and South Asia (19 Jan. 2015).

[2] All of the following information was provided by the independent analyst on Afghanistan in his 9 January 2015 correspondence. He has a Master's degree in Peace and Conflict Studies from Malmo University in Sweden and has been conducting research on Afghanistan since 2001. He has previously completed research for UK and Swedish government agencies and has conducted and published research on Taliban propaganda and communications. His work has been published in the *European Security Review* and in the *NATO Review*, among others.

[3] The EASO is an agency of the European Union (EU) that "acts as a centre of expertise on asylum" and that provides assistance to EU member states to "fulfill their European and international obligations to give protection to people in need" (EU n.d.).

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Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources, including: The following organizations were unable to provide information for this Response: Cooperation for Peace and Unity; International Organization for Migration; Swedish Committee for Afghanistan.

The following organizations were unable to provide information within the time constraints of this Response: Afghanistan – Embassy in Ottawa.

Attempts to contact the following were unsuccessful within the time constraints of this Response: Afghanistan – Ministry of Interior Affairs, Ministry of Justice; professor specializing in Afghanistan-Pakistan relations, New York University; Open Asia; United Nations – UNHCR office in Afghanistan.

Internet websites, including: Afghan Islamic Press; Afghanistan – Government Media and Information Center, Ministry of Interior Affairs; National Radio Television of Afghanistan; Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit; Afghan Voice Agency; Afghan Zariza; Al Jazeera; Amnesty International; Ariana Television Network; Bakhtar News Agency; BBC; Deutsche Welle; ecoi.net; Eurasia.net; International NGO Safety Organisation; IRIN; Khaama Press; *The New York Times*; Radio France internationale; *The Times of Central Asia*; TOLOnews.com; Shahamet-english.com; United Kingdom – Home Office; United Nations – Integrated Regional Information Networks, High Commissioner for Refugees, RefWorld, ReliefWeb.

Attachments

1. Combating Terrorism Center, at the United States Military Academy, West Point, New York. 9 May 2009. "Taliban Night Letter for the People of Paktika Province - Original Language." With English translation by the Combating Terrorism Center. <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Taliban-Night-Letter_Paktika_One-Original.pdf> [Accessed 20 Jan. 2015]

2. Human Rights Watch. July 2010. *The 'Ten-Dollar Talib' and Women's Rights: Afghan Women and the Risks of Reintegration and Reconciliation*. Pp. 8-13. <http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/afghanistan0710webwcover.pdf> [Accessed 6 Jan. 2015]

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